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Deep Thinking: Arthur Conan Doyle, Dennis Wheatley and the Fiction of Atlantis

In 1965 the journalist Vincent Gaddis, a regular feature writer for magazines like *Amazing Stories* and *Worlds of Tomorrow* published *Invisible Horizons: Strange Mysteries of the Sea*. This popular study of unexplained maritime phenomena covered such Fortean topics as the *Marie Celeste*, sea ghosts and vanishing islands. Sensationalistic but reasonably even-handed in its approach, *Invisible Horizons* is today best known for providing an early account of the disappearances reported in the so-called 'Bermuda Triangle'. Although it was Charles Berlitz's book *The Bermuda Triangle* (1974) which brought the area and its anomalies widespread public attention, it was Gaddis who first coined the enduring phrase with his article 'The Deadly Bermuda Triangle', published in the February 1964 issue of *Argosy* magazine.[i] Revisiting the case for *Invisible Horizons*, he reflects upon and dismisses some of the explanations suggested to him by readers of the original piece. According to Gaddis, these missives attributed the loss of ships and planes in the loosely defined zone to:

> […] all manner of wild things from interference by 'flying saucers' or "something from outer space," to space warps that caused planes and ships to enter another dimension, and disintegrating rays from a "30,000-year-old Atlantean power plant".

It is the latter, Atlantean, point that seems to get the most derision from Gaddis. Despite *Invisible Horizons* being a book about sea mysteries, he has little time for stories of Atlantis, the legendary kingdom – variously imagined as a city, an island, if not an entire continent – which is said to have suffered a catastrophic flood before sinking beneath the ocean.

This is a slightly surprising but not unexpected omission, given Gaddis' approach to his topic. It is surprising because *Invisible Horizons* was published at a time when there was a critical mass of writing and speculation on the origins, location and fate of the vanished city. First mentioned in Plato's fourth century dialogue *Timaeus*, Atlantis gained a foothold on the modern imagination with the appearance of Ignatius Donnelly's encyclopedic volume *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*

(1882). The book was republished in 1946 and in the intervening years a veritable culture industry had blossomed around the myth that included theosophical works such as W. Scott Elliott's *The Story of Atlantis* (1896); Lewis Spence's 'Geographical, Historical and Ethnological sketch' *The History of Atlantis* (1926); Sir Gerald Hargreaves' play *Atalanta: A Story of Atlantis* (1945), and a wide range of fictional works including Clark Ashton Smith's 'Atlantis' stories written for *Weird Tales* (1930-34) and respective novels by Arthur Conan Doyle and Dennis Wheatley: *The Maracot Deep* (1929) and *They Found Atlantis* (1936).

In parallel with these literary endeavours, the American clairvoyant Edgar Cayce made a series of predictions throughout the 1920s regarding the glorious 'rediscovery' of Atlantis. He offered 1968 as the date of the city's 'return' from the sea, an event he claimed would announce the start of a wonderful period of enlightenment.[ii] By the time Gaddis was writing *Invisible Horizons*, then, Atlantis and its much-fabled cataclysm had made the leap from pseudo-historical event to New Age symbol. Both perspectives were on display in several works, variously historical and esoteric, that appeared shortly after Gaddis' book such as J.V. Luce's *The End of Atlantis* (1969), Berlitz's *The Mystery of Atlantis* (1969), Andrew Tomas' *Atlantis: From Legend to Discovery* (1972) and Brad Steiger's *Atlantis Rising* (1973).

Gaddis steers away from this material because in *Invisible Horizons* he attempts to explain the unexplained, describing himself as a "freelance writer who specializes in exploring the borderlands where fact emerges from myth and legend". Throughout the book he assesses evidence and analyses testimony (however vague). Atlantis does not fit into this remit because it has always existed as an *idea*. For Gaddis, Atlantis represents a zone of largely uncharted waters, a triangle formed out of the extreme edges of folklore, oceanography and speculative archaeology. Consideration of Atlantis would require Gaddis to explore a borderland very different to the one he maps at the outset of his book. This would not be a borderland where fact *emerges* from myth and legend but a borderland where fact *becomes* myth and legend.

That said, a closer look at the material Gaddis implicitly distances himself from suggests that the cultural history of Atlantis is marked by a mode of thought that does more than invest a misplaced belief in a figment of the mythic past. Certainly as regards the fiction produced by Arthur Conan

Doyle and Dennis Wheatley, their novels are adventure stories than border on the fantastic. Their characters arrive at and live for a period in Atlantis, but in each case the subaquatic realm hovers, perpetually and ambiguously, between reality and fantasy, dream and wakefulness. Neither author *fully* grounds their representation of Atlantis in the 'real' world, so to speak; it remains utterly *otherworldly*. This is not so much scepticism on the part of the authors or their characters, rather it is a key facet of the mythic – if not archetypal – function of Atlantis within the western imagination.

Doyle's novel follows the oceanographer Professor Maracot and his companions, zoologist Cyrus Headley and roustabout Bill Scanlan, as they descend in a bathysphere to the "bottom of the Atlantic Ocean". They intend to carry out a survey of undersea life at the edge of a vast, unmapped trench. With the achievements of the 1872-76 *Challenger* expedition in mind, particularly its 'discovery' and measurement of the Challenger Deep and the Mariana Trench, Doyle has his team look forward to similar success, prospectively placing the "pit of great depth", on "the charts of the future as the 'Maracot Deep'." These hopes are scuppered though when a cyclone hits their steamship, the *Stratford*, and the bathysphere is attacked by a subaquatic "beast unknown" and Maracot and his crew sink, untethered into the "abyss". Having reached the far depths of the ocean floor they eventually find themselves in an "ancient city" populated by "Atlanteans".

Wheatley's *They Found Atlantis* follows a similar plot line, although it draws the majority of its characters not from the academy but from a fashionable set of ex-Naval officers, screen actors and aristocrats who holiday on the island of Madeira and the languid noon-time sun of its capital, Funchal. Here they pass the time swimming, sun-bathing, throwing around sexist banter and imbibing sherry cobblers before lunch. The mild ennui of this routine is interrupted by the arrival of one Doctor Herman Tisch, a scientist and explorer seeking to launch his own bathysphere expedition. Where Doyle's Maracot sets out to chart the depths, Tisch is focused on an act of maritime archaeology: his project is, from the outset, an attempt to locate the historical site of Atlantis. There is also something of a financial imperative. As Wheatley's arch-aristocrat Camilla, the Duchess of de Solento-Ragina puts it "he plans to go a mile deep in the sea and dig up all the

vast treasure from the lost continent". As the novel progresses a complicated hijacking and kidnapping plot emerges but the result for Ticsh's bathysphere crew is the same as in Doyle's book: they are uncoupled from their ship, sink to the ocean floor and eventually, miraculously, find themselves in Atlantis: a gardened 'Paradise' ensconced in a vast undersea cavern.

Doyle's characters are introduced to Atlantis with a replenishing meal of milk and honey, they see temple buildings of gleaming gold, meet beautiful youthful citizens possessed of "wonderful powers" and witness the operation of a "marvellous invention" that combines "telepathy and television". Wheatley too presents Atlantis as distinctly Elysian. Waking from replenishing sleep soon after their arrival, the characters find a bucolic scene of "golden sunshine" and "luxuriant vegetation" that leads into pools of "deep blue lapis lazuli". As in Doyle's novel the land is populated by beautiful people with magical abilities. Both writers clearly make use of a 'lost world' motif to frame Atlantis as a kind of 'mirror zone'. That's to say, Doyle and Wheatley's versions of Atlantis represent everything which the familiar terrestrial world is not. It is exotic, paradisiacal and mystical; ancient, lacking in the trappings of modernity than give rise to such mechanical objects as they bathysphere, but at the same time the Atlantean culture is in possession of technology that far exceeds the knowledge of Maracot and Tisch.

One sees many of Doyle and Wheatley's ideas in later, cinematic representations of Atlantis in the likes of George Pal's *Atlantis: The Lost Continent* (1961) and Kevin Connor's *Warlords of Atlantis* (1978). Beyond these fantasy elements, though, the idea of Atlantis as the crucible of a golden age, is consistent with the wider cultural history of the myth. The first recorded reference to the continent appears in Plato's dialogue the *Timaeus*, written circa 360 BC. During this long philosophical examination of the physical world, and its contents, Plato's speakers Critias and Socrates discuss Atlantis and its history. They describe an enormous island with a sophisticated, fully developed culture which constituted "a great and wonderful Empire". The city of Atlantis, some eleven miles in diameter is said to have been built on a topographic elevation surrounded by a circular network of land and water and a complex system of canals, harbours and docks that led out to sea. Critias describes the single night of floods and earthquakes that destroyed the island (said to have occurred some 9,000 years prior to the dialogue) as an act of retribution on

the part of the gods for the city's decadence and military aggression. Such behaviour was seen to be a dilution of the Atlantean's divine origins. Given the philosophical role of Plato's dialogues it is easy to read the Atlantis of *Timaeus* as an allegory of an ideal state, akin to that of Plato's *Republic*. Certainly this is the way that *Timaeus* was received by subsequent generations of thinkers, particularly those of the European Renaissance. Philosophers like Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella and Francis Bacon used Atlantis as a hypothetical and pedagogical utopia; an efficient thinking tool whereby the conceit of an idealized island city or state could be used as a kind of canvas on which to work through a set of ideas relating to government and society.

Although Plato's accounts are somewhat fragmentary, his description of Atlantis presents us with a classic *fall* narrative, one that besets an entire nation, the suggestion being that Atlantis constitutes a primary civilization, an origin point. It is mankind's Mother Empire and its loss represent humanity's exile from an idealized golden age. Ignatius Donnelly makes a similar point in *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. 'Antediluvian' means 'before the flood', or 'before the deluge' and Donnelly intends for emphasis to be placed on the direct article of his title, because in his argument, the flood that destroys Atlantis is *the* flood: the one that inspires all others. Donnelly argues that not only was Atlantis a specific place, but its fall was a literal cataclysm, a fall into water. This was a decline which, via its transformation into myth, informed the trope of the 'great' fall in other religious systems of the world and associated myths of a paradise lost. For Donnelly Atlantis was thus:

> […] the true antediluvian world; the garden of Eden; the Gardens of Hesperides; the Elysian fields; the Gardens of Alcinous; the Mesomphalos, the Olympos; the Asgard of the traditions of the ancient nations; representing a universal memory of a great land where early mankind dwelt for ages in peace and happiness.

Despite the prevalence of this mythic thinking within texts such as Donnelly's, in much of this material there remains an insistence on the historical actuality of Atlantis. Plato's description, for example, is suffused with geographical specificity. In the dialogue Socrates is not asked to *imagine* a paradise but instead he is informed that Atlantis lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules (the ancient name for Gibraltar) and was larger than Libya (the known part of Africa) and Asia.

Travelling across the island permitted passage to what is called “the opposite continent which surrounded the true ocean”, a possibility which, as Charles Berlitz observed, was seemingly vindicated by the “eventual discovery of the opposite continent in 1492”. As such, texts composed in the wake of Campanella and Bacon, such as Athanasius Kircher’s *Mundus Subterraneus* (1664 / 1678) – a massive study of the Earth’s interior – continued to accept Atlantis as a historical and geographical reality and included maps based on Plato’s account.

Writers such as Clark Ashton Smith and Robert E. Howard made use of the historical distance surrounding Atlantis as part of their fictional world building. In ‘The Last Incantation’ (1930), the first of four Atlantis-set short stories written for *Weird Tales*, Ashton Smith has the magician Malygris preside over “ancient volumes bound in serpent skin […] the frightful lore of Atlantis”. Later, in ‘A Voyage to Sfanomoë’ (1931), he elaborates further on Atlantean culture describing the “Various types of air-vessels […] used in Atlantis for epochs”. Regal, mysterious, technologically advanced and equally suffused with ancient, magical knowledge Ashton Smith’s Atlantis is a majestic empire. It is also in a state of decadence. Across the stories Ashton Smith has his world facing the “inevitable perishing” of its final days as it falls into the sea. Howard’s King Kull, first introduced in ‘The Shadow Kingdom’ (1929), traverses a similar landscape. He is described as a “warrior of Atlantis”, a man in exile who has assumed the kingship of the rival nation Valusia. Engaged in feudal intrigue with the ‘barbarian’ Picts and the nation-states of Lemuria and Mu, Howard’s Kull exists in an ancient world of imperial ambition. Within the imaginative historical lineage that Howard detailed in his essay ‘The Hyborean Age’ (1936), Kull’s world is pre-cataclysmic. Atlantis disappears along with the other great nations in disaster that precedes (and gives rise to), the age of Conan:

> Then the cataclysm rocked the world. Atlantis and Lemuria sank, the Pictish islands were heaved up to form the mountain peaks of a new continent, while sections of the Thurian continent vanished under the waves or sinking, forming great inland lakes and seas. Volcanoes broke forth and terrific earthquakes shook down the shining cities of the empires. Whole nations were blotted out and the face of the world was forever changed.

Here Howard recounts the familiar fate of Atlantis, but like Ashton Smith the overall focus is upon the glory of a pre-flood world. The two writers use Atlantis as a kind of pre-historical canvas, one upon which their martial fantasies and imagined empires can be built.

Meanwhile Doyle and Wheatley, writing at approximately the same time, move away from the attempt to create a pseudo-historical epic and instead have their ancient Atlanteans encountered contemporaneously, in the 'present' of the novels: the early twentieth century. For all the fantastical elements within their adventure narratives, including the strange sense of time experienced in Atlantis, there is no time-travel or temporal regression. Both writers construct internal histories for their novels that stick close to Plato's account of Atlantis, but the Atlanteans encountered by their characters are the surviving descendants of this pre-cataclysmic civillization. For Doyle and Wheatley then, Atlantis represents an occulted city state, hidden under the ocean with the potential to exert a powerful influence the 'surface' world.

This framing of Atlantis, not as an atavistic world but one that parallels the 'modern' is much more in line with the view of Edgar Cayce than Ignatius Donnelly. Cayce was born in Kentucky in 1877 and from 1902 until his death in 1945 he achieved a degree of fame as "the sleeping prophet": he possessed the apparent ability to place himself into a trance and, oracle-like, deliver pronouncements on questions and consultations from the public. Many of these readings related to the 'past-lives' of those who consulted him and from the mid-1920s, a consistent point of reference was Atlantis. Atlantis was for Cayce not just a primary civilization but a kind of spiritual crucible from where souls, or to use his phrase "entities", are first made manifest before beginning their long cycle of reincarnation through the ages.

Reincarnation was for Cayce, also a process of repetition. Each entity brings into each incarnation a set of predominant and consistent tendencies. This was reflective of a wider epochal circularity in which successive ages rise and fall according to repeated cycles of technological hubris. In Cayce's system, Atlantis developed technology very similar to our own: electrical devices, transportation, x-rays and what he calls "the terrible crystal" and elsewhere the "firestone". Whatever the precise nature of Cayce's abilities his pronouncements have been taken by his followers as dire warnings regarding the technological trajectory of the twentieth century.

They Found Atlantis and *The Maracot Deep* do not share they prophetic intentions of Cayce's writings. They do, however, maintain a sense of foreboding or at the very least unease in their handling of the Atlantean theme. For all the wonderment registered by their characters upon finding themselves in the beguiling undersea kingdom, the language of both novels continually flickers between reality and fantasy, sleep and wakefulness. Wheatley has Camilla regard her arrival in Atlantis as "a very vivid dream", her suitor, Vladimir, claims to be in a similar state of disbelief being either "drunk" or – in casual parlance that a contemporary reader might reasonably wince at – in need of a "cushioned cell". Maracot and his companions also become aware of their fabled surroundings as if waking from a "blurred nightmare" into "a glorious dream". That their time in Atlantis is in each novel limited and they return to their lives with little possibility of seeing the kingdom again further emphasises this oneiric tone. Once glimpsed and fleetingly felt, it cannot be regained.

Wheatley and Doyle both embellish their depictions of Atlantis with details of the climate, the food and the clothing of its inhabitants, but in each case the place remains hazily insubstantial; an *experience* rather than an actual *location*. More ominously, despite the Atlanteans delighting in a life of sensory pleasures, the travellers in each novel also regard their journeys to this lost world as distinctly purgatorial. As well as the language of dreams, Doyle and Wheatley also bring to their novels the language of death. "If we were dead to the world, we had at least found a life beyond", opines Headley in *The Maracot Deep*, adding that the manifold pleasures of life in Atlantis "promised some compensation for what we had lost". Count Axel, one of the travellers in *They Found Atlantis*, takes this further, reading his presence at what the novel terms "the Garden of the Gods" as the experience of an afterlife: "We all died together in the [bathy]sphere – quite painlessly. There is no other explanation for … all this". For both writers then, Atlantis is not quite heaven, not quite hell but an uncanny space that stands ambiguously in-between. They intentionally place it at precisely the type of uncategorizable borderland between imagination and fact, actuality and fantasy, that Vincent Gaddis found so difficult to codify.

As contributions to the wider mythology of Atlantis, we might now want to ask, what is actually being symbolised or signified here? What are Doyle and Wheatley trying to say with their

strikingly similar and consistently ambiguous representations of the lost continent? Across the two novels, the authors frame Atlantis as the site of a golden age, but at the same time, save for the chance encounters that follow the disastrous expeditions and near-death experiences in the novel, this harmonious birth-place is all but impossible to reach. Tempting but unobtainable, the Atlantis that emerges from Doyle and Wheatley's writing is a symbol of intense desire. Add to this the deeply resonant presence of the sea in the texts and the novels begin to speak of a lost sense of aquatic wholeness; the unconscious need to return to the ocean.

Sigmund Freud and his colleague Sandor Ferenczi saw this 'phantasy' (that which pertains to wish fulfilment) as an important element in the construction of the conscious mind. Freud saw it as a desire for that which he termed the 'oceanic', the sense of "oneness" that we instinctively associate with early infancy, maternal proximity and the experience of the womb. Ferenzci took this idea further in his 1924 book *Thalassa* (the name of the Greek goddess of the sea) in which he argued, as Michele Bertrand summarises, that

> The individual catastrophe of birth duplicates the collective catastrophe of the drying up of the oceans, which finds reverse expression in the flood accounts of many cultures. In biblical and other cosmic narratives, the earth separates from the primitive ocean of which the mother is symbol and substitute.

For Ferenzci, the trauma of birth which for all terrestrial species involves exile from the internal ocean, finds unconscious expression in deluge narratives. From this perspective, the permutations of Atlantis serve as ways to re-imagine and to deal with this experience. A similar idea is built into the word 'Atlantis' itself. The name, as Wheatley reminds his readers, is associated with the god Atlas, son of Poseidon. It means 'Island of Atlas' and Atlas was the Titan charged with holding up the earth. He is the prototypical Greek god associated with navigation, astronomy, who is 'hard, enduring' and who 'upholds and supports'. Accordingly, the myth of Atlantis works in a similar way. It offers up an image of a foundation culture; the ego origin, as it were, of human civillization.

It is at this point that Atlantis starts to become a symbol of fear and dread. In the Freudian reading, the desire for the sea also carries with it a sort of death drive because to consummate

the desire for a state of selflessness constitutes an obvious loss of self: a double bind neatly encapsulated by Atlantis's combination of paradise and disaster. In the reading of Atlantis as humanity's ancestor, the fear relates to sense that humankind is significantly older and has a history significantly deeper than established records might suggest. This is the implication of Donnelly and the later work of speculative archaeologists like Erich Von Daniken. That Atlantis represents an Antediluvian world that was also tremendously advanced, suggests that its loss also involves the annihilation of entire chapters of human development. This vertigo is similar to the peculiar sense of horror of that one finds in the work of H.P. Lovecraft. The fear he generates in stories like 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) relates not the ferocity of his tentacled monsters *per se*, but to the philosophical consequences of conceptualising these "Old Ones". When Cthulhu finally makes itself manifest, erupting out of the sea from the "nightmare corpse-city of R'lyeh", the cosmic horror of the awful vision is distinctly epistemological. To witness it demands that one reassesses and rebuilds (or else go 'mad') the parameters of knowledge. Doyle and Wheatley populate their novels with similar monsters – enormous crustaceans and cephalopods – but it is Atlantis that works, ultimately, as their 'Old One'. Resting in the deep for generations as a parallel but uncanny version of human society, Altantis emerges from their work as a beguiling but disturbing take on the lost world motif. It is a message in a bottle, but one that brings neither comfort nor reward to those who find it, forcing them instead to radically re-calibrate what they know and who they are.

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[i] Vincent Gaddis, 'The Deadly Bermuda Triangle', *Argosy* (February 1964), pp. 28-29, 116-118.
[ii] See Edgar Cayce, *Edgar Cayce on Atlantis* (2010).